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ABSTRACT

A number of sociological research findings on middle class bias of the traditional public school are reviewed. Unless the effective schools research movement expands to include alternative educational research structures in its research efforts, it may fail to find effective schools that are equally effective for both low and middle socioeconomic status students. A 90-item reference list is included. (DB)

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THE TOWERING TENACITY OF STUDENT SOCIAL CLASS: HOW EFFECTIVE CAN EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS BE?

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Summary

The author reviews several sociological research findings on the middle class bias of the traditional public school. He comes to the conclusion that unless the effective schools research movement expands to include alternative educational structures in its research efforts, it may fail to find effective schools that are equally effective for both low and middle socioeconomic status students.

Introduction: The Effective Schools Movement

One recent educational research effort has been to find effective schools which overcome the effects of student social class on learning (Edmonds, 1979, 1983, 1986; Good & Brophy, 1986). There are certain problems with the approach taken by the effective schools research movement (or ESR for short). Aside from the issue of how one defines "effectiveness" (Stedman, 1987), there is also the problem of whether any of the public schools examined by ESR are different enough from the traditional structure of the public school paradigm to overcome the middle class bias of the traditional public school (Richer, 1974). Unfortunately, ESR has failed to indentify schools that overcome the effects of social class (Good and Brophy, 1986). As Good and Brophy put it, when reporting on research done by Rowan and Denk (1982), "decreases in [average school-wide] scores from year to year were significantly correlated with changes in the socioeconomic composition of these schools' student bodies." (1986, p. 587) This is in essence the same finding that several sociologists found prior to the beginning of effective schools research. The author submits that the reason for the failure to find schools that are equally effective for low socioeconomic status (SES) students is because ESR limits itself inside the traditional school paradigm, that is, inside that school paradigm which many research studies have shown causes schools to favor one group of students (middle class) over another group (lower class) (Clark, 1965, 1972). He holds that without researching non-traditional school structures which are "effective" for low SES students, or at least as effective as the traditional paradigm is for mid-SES students, one can't generalize from effective schools research that the effective schools found are equally effective for all students. The effective schools "discovered" by ESR are no more "effective" for low-SES students than their underlying middle-class-type structure allows them to be (which in effect may not be much). To back up his claim, the author discusses both the reward characteristics of the public schools that have developed over time, and research findings regarding student academic achievement. He calls for research inside non-traditional existing or pilot-experimental schools that may hold several secrets to "school effectiveness" for low SES students (Walberg, et. al., 1988). He closes his paper with a preliminary analysis of the possible significance for effective schools

research of student-centered curricula, relational teaching (that is, teaching that relates to the life experiences of low SES students), and non-delayed or "short term" graduation rewards.

The Role of Structure in Structuring Institutional Possibilities

If an institution is well established socially or politically, or if it is extremely costly to replace it with another institution, then people are less likely to change it, let alone replace it with a more "effective" institutional arrangement, but instead try to meet their new goals within the parameters of the old institutional structure (Apple, 1990; Bourdieu, 1977; Makedon, 1989; Timar, 1989). Most sociological research studies on learning have been carried out inside traditionally structured schools, and therefore are bound to reflect the class biases of the underlying traditional school structure[1]. Consequently, not only is it socially difficult to reform public schools to make them more effective for low SES students, or to build from scratch new pilot schools with public funds, but much of the research so far has been limited inside traditional public schools, and therefore impossible to generalize about effective schools as a whole.

Ironically, ESR efforts may lead further away from finding effective schools for low-SES students: the more "effective" a traditional-type school is, the more traditional it must be to be effective, and therefore the more likely it is that it will reward the middle class student even more. If "effective" schools have higher average academic scores, it may be more because of their maximum success with middle class teaching methods, than their ability to succeed more than, or outside their "middle-classness." It is for this reason that unless effective schools research (ESR) expands to include an analysis of the "effectiveness" of alternative educational structures, it may amount to more rhetoric, than radical reform (Makedon, 1992). The question, then, becomes, should we change the mission of the public schools to a purely academic one, if change it we must to make it easier for them to meet their goals for low SES students (and therefore to be perceived as "effective")? (Makedon, 1990a)? Should we replace their underlying structure altogether, while keeping their original social-academic mission intact? Or is it, finally, impossible that any institution, let alone the public school, meets so overloaded or possibly contradictory a mission as the public schools now have, however efficiently managed, well-supplied, or structurally flexible such institution may be? In this paper we address only one of these questions, namely, whether public schools as presently designed can teach low SES students as effectively, academically, as they do mid-SES students.

The Structure of the Public Schools

In the paper we refer to the underlying structure of most of today's public schools as the "traditional public school" (=TPS). By "structure" we mean

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[1]On the role of structure in "structuralist" interpretations of social phenomena, see Levi-Strauss (1963/1976); and Piaget (1970).

everything that makes such school be, including its architecture, subculture, organization, methodology, curricula, expectations, staff hiring-retention-promotion systems, or student reward-discipline-graduation policies; or, more broadly, the very fact that we are using this type of traditionally-structured school with which to teach, as opposed to using an alternative school, or some type of non-school option (Illich, 1971). All these characteristics may be collectively referred to as our particular school "paradigm." We use the term "paradigm" here in the same sense as did Thomas Kuhn in his book The Structure of Scientific Revolutions to refer to the models used in scientific inquiry (Kuhn, 1962)[2]. However "effective" a TPS-type school structure might be, teachers inside such school are led through the reward system of TPS, and through less conspicuous but just effective mechanisms, such as, the "hidden curriculum," to reward certain student skills or behavioral patterns more than others (Apple, 1986; Giroux and Purpel, 1983)[3]. It is in this context that TPS rewards middle class students more than it does lower class students: middle class students do better academically precisely because of their upbringing in middle class environments, which in turn TPS rewards or values more highly than the skills, experiences, or learning modalities of the lower class students.

Social Class and Learning Inside the Traditional School

The findings of sociologists seem to contradict several of the assumptions made by people who believed in the ability of the public school to educate all young people equally well. Historically, there was always hope in this country, from the time public schools were founded in their modern form, in the 1830s, to the present, that they can serve as windows of equal educational opportunity,

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[2]The author recognizes that there may be a difference between "structure" and "paradigm," especially as they are used in structuralist analyses of social phenomena (Sturrock, 1979). Thus by "structure" some authors may refer more to the institutionalized form that a belief or value may take, and therefore to its structural correspondence; while by "paradigm" they may mean the value or belief itself, which in turn forms the basis for a particular structure. The two "overlap" in the sense that within each structure may inhere a value system or "paradigm" that in turns forms the beliefs of those who work or derive service from such institution (as students or teachers may inside TPS), who in turn adopt or "internalize" this value system or paradigm, and in turn use this paradigm to further re-inforce the original structure. Since there are several interchangeable uses of these two terms in the literature, and the issue is by far too complicated to discuss fully in this paper, we are using the two terms for our purposes here almost interchangeably, with the understanding that on further analysis they may not be logically so.

[3]The traditional school structure may include such well known characteristics as the cellular organization of space into self-contained classrooms, organization of knowledge into subject matter, division of students by age rather than ability, specific certification criteria for teacher entry into the teaching profession, and a host of other criteria regarding school attendance, discipline, homework, textbooks, finance, or more broadly school administration, curriculum, or methods (Dreeben, 1968; Jackson, 1968; Lortie, 1969; Waller, 1932).

and therefore also of social advancement for the poor (Church, 1976, pp. 55-113). Yet as sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s have shown, the single most important predictor of student academic success is not the public school itself, but the socioeconomic background of the students (Boocock, 1980, p. 39). Thus instead of the public school helping to break the social class cycle, the public school seemed to maintain the status quo of social class, if not accentuate social class differences through its particular reward system. Assuming a direct relation between academic achievement and social mobility (Lipset and Bendix, 1959), those born poor seemed less likely as a result of their public school education to break out of poverty, since they were unable as a result of their public school education to "catch up" with their middle class peers (Jencks, et. al., 1972). As a result, sociologists turned away from studying schools as such, since they seem to have relatively less impact on student learning, anyway, and spent considerable amount of energy studying social classes to discover what are the specific child-rearing patterns that may influence a child's learning in school (Boocock, 1980, pp. 65-83). In the 1970s, there emerged a movement, called the "effective schools movement," in the hope that at least some public schools have much greater impact on student learning than the sociologists had found (Good and Brophy, 1986). The theory went that if we could find those among them that worked "effectively," then we could replicate our findings in other schools, thus reversing the apparent middle-class bias of the public schools (Edmonds, 1979, 1983, 1986). In other words, effective schools research began with the assumption that in certain "effective" schools, student social class is not as important a predictor of student success as the school itself (Edmonds, 1983; Good and Brophy, 1986). If true, this meant that public schools could be improved to serve lower SES students at least as well as they seemed so far to have served mid-SES students.

Findings from Research in Educational Sociology

The validity of our thesis regarding the middle-class bias of TPS hinges on whether TPS in fact does favor mid-SES students through the means it employs to educate its students; and whether what mid-SES students learn at home as a result of their social class background is in fact conducive to higher academic achievement within TPS. Some of the most important findings of educational sociologists regarding learning in the public schools include, in addition to the importance of SES, the importance of independence training in middle class families, which is in turn rewarded by the emphasis in TPS environments on independent work; the opportunities which the middle class home offers for abstract types of thinking, which is in turn rewarded by the emphasis in TPS on abstract types of learning, such as, learning from textbooks; what one author called the "achievement syndrome" of the middle class, which in turn puts pressure on middle class children to succeed in school, so they can attend college, so they can get a middle class job; and the middle-class bias of teachers, in general, which together with the importance of teacher expectations on student achievement translates to teachers expecting mid-SES students to do better, which predictably enough results in mid-SES students actually doing better, academically, than low-SES students. We shall examine each of these issues in turn, below, intending eventually to show how TPS as a whole may be so pro-mid-SES that we can't hope to improve the effectiveness of our public schools for non-mid-SES students if we limit our research within only or mostly TPS types of schools.

Independence Training

Educational researchers found that children from middle class families have more independence training, meaning, more training to do things or solve problems on their own, learn from their mistakes, or participate in family decision-making than children from lower SES or poor families (Anderson and Evans, 1976; Crandall, et al., 1960; Crandall, 1964; Elder, 1965; Epstein and McPartland, 1977; Kohn, 1959, 1976; McClelland, et al., 1955; Strodbeck, 1958). For example, there is an emphasis in middle class families on participant or "democratic" child rearing practices, which allow mid-SES children to feel capable of making decisions for themselves, which in turn encourages independence. Sociologists reasoned that as a result of the opportunity to do things on their own, including the opportunity to fail, children from middle class families do better in school because they are not only more motivated to work on their own, but also have learned how. To borrow from the lexicon of psychoanalysis, they have managed to better "internalize" school demands as a result of having experienced responsibility or independence at home. This ability to work independently is in turn rewarded by TPS through the means it employs to educate students, including the independence required to complete homework, write tests without help from others, compete for a grade, participate in class activities as individuals capable of learning by themselves, or be evaluated on the basis of impersonal or what Dreeben called "universalistic" standards (Dreeben, 1968, pp. 74-76).

Middle Class "Achievement Syndrome"

Another factor in mid-SES child rearing practices that favors a middle class child inside the TPS paradigm may be what has been described as the success orientation or "achievement syndrome" of the middle class (Rosen, 1956). This success orientation eventually rubs off on the childern who grow up in such a success oriented environment (Cahman, 1949). A middle class child may be so terrified by the idea of failure in school, or of disappointing his parents, peers, or "significant others," that he puts forth more effort to succeed in school than does the low-SES student, so he can move on to the next stage in his academic career, and eventually college and a middle class job.

Abstract Thinking

Another finding was that middle class children have higher abstract thinking abilities than lower class children (Bernstein, 1961, 1970, 1977; Entwisle, 1970). There are several possible reasons for this, most of which seem to be tied to the better economic circumstances of the middle class child. For example, while low-SES students must constantly worry about how to secure the basic necessities for their survival, such as, food, and are therefore more closely tied to daily events and personal concerns, mid-SES students enjoy higher financial security, and therefore more time to think about long-term or "abstract" events, plans, or concepts. Having financial security allows mid-SES students more opportunities to "disengage" from daily necessities, relax, or think about life or their future from a distance, and therefore to think in more abstract or philosophical terms, which in turn helps them to understand abstract terms in books or classroom discussions better. By contrast lower SES students

are forced by the circumstances to think more about immediate needs, and therefore develop relational types of thinking patterns, that is, the ability to understand easier what relates directly to their own personal experiences. Unfortunately, TPS does not reward relational types of thinking as highly as it does abstract types of thinking, for example, through its curricular use of textbooks, which are by definition primarily collections of abstract or "non-relational" ideas. A textbook may discuss the civil war in ways which the low-SES child who is unable to abstract as well as the mid-SES child may be unable to understand, empathize with, or feel motivated to read about. By contrast, a relational approach that uses the student's own life experiences makes it easier for the low-SES student to see the connection between the subject and his own life, and therefore to want to become more involved in his school studies. As a result of the emphasis by TPS on abstract types of thought, children who haven't had enough opportunities to develop their abstract-cognitive powers, as presumably did not students from low-SES backgrounds, may find it more difficult to follow, analyze, or understand the kinds of ideas that are taught in TPS, and therefore more difficult to succeed within the TPS structure.

Middle class bias of Schoolteachers

Teachers as a group have been identified as lower middle to middle social class (Lortie, 1975, pp. 10-13, 34-36). It has been shown that teachers reflect in their teaching the biases of their own social class (Anyon, 1983; Clark, 1965; Rist, 1970; Wilson, 1977). This is true irrespective of their gender or ethnic background. For example, it was found that a teacher's expectations of her students, in this case, of an African American teacher teaching in an all-black classroom, depended not on the actual academic achievement or even aptitude of her students, but merely on their social class outlook in the classroom (Rist, 1970). To continue with our description of this teacher, which several research studies found is not atypical (Braun, 1976; Finn, 1972; Harvey and Slatin, 1975; Leacock, 1969; Mendels and Flanders, 1973; Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968), she had higher expectations for middle class students, interacted more frequently with them than she did with lower class students, gave them preferential sitting, and distributed positive rewards more often to middle class students than to lower class students. There is also considerable research that shows that adult expectations, whether from a teacher or a parent, have a significant influence on student learning (Crandall, 1964; Gans, 1976; Kahl, 1953). It follows that a teacher's middle class orientation may be compounded by the power which his expectations may have on students to favor strongly middle class students who are held to a higher standard, or are expected to do "better" than lower social class students. To compound this middle class bias in teachers' teaching even further, the majority of public schools are built on the basis of a structure or "paradigm" which is, as we attempted to show, above, structurally designed to favor middle class students.

Recommendations for Research

If by "effective schools" we mean equally effective for both mid-SES and low-SES students, meaning both have equally high academic results, then it follows from our discussion so far that, given the pro-mid-SES bias of the traditionally structured school, we couldn't find public schools that make it easier for low-SES students to succeed unless we also consider expanding our

research sample to include non-TPS schools (Makedon, 1992). Obviously, we can't hope to "expand" our sample, in the sense of diversifying it with different school prototypes, by simply includ'ng more of the same (that is, more TPS-type schools). To expand it, we should consider all types of non-TPS schools, both those that have been proposed in theory, and those that have been tested, tried, or operate successfully in the private sector. Some of the alternative school paradigms whose "effectiveness" could be studied include any of the alternative schools known to have had at least one prototype or pilot school in operation (Coleman, Hoffer and Kilgore, 1981; Dewey, 1934; Haertel, James, and Levin, 1987; Kohl, 1969; Kozol, 1972; Neill, 1960; Ornstein, 1989, pp. 554-566); theoretical alternatives which have yet to be applied, but which are not for that reason alone necessarily unrealizable or without promise (Wingo, 1974); or educational alternatives that co-exist in great variety within the same public school system, which in effect make the system as a whole another type of educational alternative (Fantini, 1973). Some examples from each one of these categories may suffice to illustrate the range of possible alternatives that could be studied. These aletrnatives are by no means exhaustive lists of possible alternatives, but serve to illustrate the variety of educational possibilities.From among the first category, free schools (of the A.S. Neill type), lab schools (of the Deweyan type), Waldorf schools (based on Rudolf Steiner's theory), Montessori schools, military schools, parochial schools, learning networks, schools without walls, educational parks-based schools, museum-based schools, or tutorial schools; or a variety of alternative teaching methods, from mastery learning and critical thinking to team teaching (Block, 1971; Bloom, 1976; Lipman, 1984). From among the second category, socratic schools, existentialistic schools, perennial type schools, field-based schools, or any other type of school that may be deduced from a philosophy of education, or other psychological or anthropological theory, or past historical practice (such as, the classical model of city-as-the-school; Marrou, 1956: 21-75). From among the third category, the most obvious is Mario Fantini's "schools-within-schools" (Fantini, 1973); or to a certain extent the co-existence of alternatives that is beginning to emerge in some urban school districts as a result of the spread of "magnet schools" (Rosenbaum and Presser, 1978).

The traditional structure of the public schools has recently come under attack by several leaders in the education profession, including Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers (Finn, 1990; Shanker, 1990). The pro-reform climate that presently exists in the country may present ESR with the opportunity to expand its research efforts to include educational alternatives that so far may have been politically, socially, or financially difficult to justify. For example, in South Pointe Elementary School, in Miami, Florida, teaching and learning processes have been drastically re-organized: they are neither traditional-classroom, nor textbook-centered. Although almost all South Pointe students are low-SES, they are allegedly advancing at the rate of 1.5 grade levels for each year they are enrolled (Boyd, 1991). We may wish to examine an educational alternative, or in the event none exists, to set up a pilot alternative that rewards lower SES students for learning on the basis of their own learning styles, such as, relational types of thinking processes, or their need for immediate reward. It is in this sense that the current trend toward a multicultural curriculum may benefit especially low SES students who may find such curriculum more relevant to their own life circumstances (Banks, 1988). Whether such curriculum actually helps low-SES students achieve may also

depend on the degree to which even a multicultural curriculum is made relevant to the present life experiences of low SES students, as opposed to allowing it to become so abstract that such students may find it difficult to relate to. Unfortunately, in spite of such strong student-centered arguments made by such eminent educators as Rousseau (1979), Pestalozzi (1900), Froebel (1889), and Dewey (1979, 1980, 1934), there has been relatively little empirical research on student-centered educational alternatives. Most public schools are built around "pre-arranged" lesson plans and curricula that may have little relevance to the life experiences of the students being taught at the time. This doesn't mean that a "student-centered" approach is not "right" for non-low-SES students, but that research done so far seems to indicate that it is learning-effective at least for low-SES students. In fact, research may show that a relational approach may equally help both low and mid-SES students learn, or that it helps low-SES students at least as much as it does mid-SES students. Finally, it may be noted that what is required in a relational approach is not a specific teaching technique, but that all such techniques are, to borrow from John Dewey's lexicon, student-centered, that is, rooted in the life experiences of the students being taught. It follows that a relational approach may range from the very concrete, such as, hands-on student "projects" (Kilpatrick, 1918), to the very theoretical, such as class discussions or socratic-type analyses (Plato, 1937). Contrary to certain beliefs regarding the inability of low-SES students to think critically, a relational approach does not exclude theory (discussion, analysis, criticism), but only that type of theory which has no relevance to the student's present circumstances. It is in this sense that the existence of an overwhelming preponderance of low-SES students in non-theoretical, technical, or vocational classes may represent our society's failure to understand the thinking processes of low-SES students (Lotto, 1985; National Center for Education Statistics, 1988).

Finally, effective schools researchers may wish to consider examining the effectiveness of schools that incorporate the dependency needs of low-SES students into the curriculum, especially their perceived need for relatively short term or "immediate" rewards. Schools that have shorter-term reward periods don't necessarily have lower graduation standards, since they may provide rewards that collectively add up to the same graduation results. To use an analogy, this school organization may be compared at the college level with getting a Bachelors degree either by enrolling directly in a four year college, which represents a long term commitment of four years that may have greater appeal for middle class students; or by enrolling first in a community college, and then transferring to a four year college, which may represent two shorter-term waiting periods, each rewarded at the end with a college degree. The community college experience may be more rewarding to low SES students whose economic circumstances may have conditioned them to rely on relatively shorter gratification periods. The point made here is that we should research the effectiveness for low-SES students of breaking down rewards into smaller steps that seem to reward good work soon after it is completed, as opposed to relying on the students' ability for delayed gratification, which seems to be more the characteristic of middle class

students[4].

Possible Objections

Certain possible objections may be raised against sociological research. We raise them here because we find them relevant to the validity of our own paradigm in the paper (and if for no other reason, to add critical perspective to our discussion). It might be objected against the work of sociologists that underlying their work there are certain assumptions regarding what is worth researching, or even researchable (Glaser, 1978; Kuhn, 1962; Makedon, 1990b, 1991). There are also larger philosophical issues regarding the validity, desirability, or possible bias of scientific or experimental methods (Braithwaite, 1953; Hanson, 1965; Husserl, 1970). Finally, sociological research may be criticized for using standardized tests to measure student achievement (Kamin, 1974); or "social class" as a yardstick for placing students into categories. These assumptions may be seen, collectively, as the sociological bias of sociological research at the time. Aside from the issue that there is possibly nothing that man can think about without at least some such type of personal perspective or "bias" (Ast, 1990; Heidegger, 1962; Makedon, 1991), the fact is that the assumptions that sociologists hold regarding academic achievement are those which public schools themselves use, and therefore congruent at least with the view that schools hold regarding academic achievement. For example, although one may disagree with the use of standardized testing to test student learning, one cannot doubt that within the standardized-testing paradigm some students were shown in-fact to do better than others (Mercer, 1989). If there is a shortcoming in sociological research, it may be not so much that school-based criteria are ignored, but, on the contrary, that they are taken too much for granted. For example, such criteria may not have been thoroughly analyzed to expose their possible "biases," underlying philosophical assumptions, or "hidden" social or political agendas. Finally, regarding the use of social class variables, although it is true that sociologists included "social class" as one of the variables with which to correlate academic achievement in their research, it was neither the only one, nor did they suddenly invent the concept of "social class" out of the blue. Instead, they found that among all the variables with which they compared academic achievement, social class seemed to have the highest degree of correlation, and therefore presumably to explain the most. The question, of course, remains whether there are additional variables which they didn't think about, but which may better explain student academic achievement. If there are, they can't totally replace social class, since social class has been consistently found to correlate with academic achievement, but at best re-interpret the influence of social class in terms of the new variables. What is important here is not whether social class is important in explaining student academic achievement, but that we don't confuse its influence inside the TPS paradigm with its influence inside an alternative research paradigm where it may play

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[4]The analogy to the community college route to a Bachelors degree is offered as a rough example of how the same academic load in any institution may be sub-divided into smaller autonomous units. It is not intended as a model for public schools to follow, nor has the author presented any evidence regarding the effectiveness or non-effectiveness of college-level experiences for low-SES students.

either no significant role, or a "different" role (e.g., favor the lower-SES student, instead of favoring the mid-SES student). It is for this reason that even research is based on certain preconceptions or "assumptions" regarding the meaning of schooling, academic achievement, school effectiveness, or even educational research (Makedon, 1991).

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